

**Norfolk, VA**

**January, 1941**

“Two, to the back of the head, execution style,” the detective said, squatting by the body lying on the wet, pot-hole-riddled cobblestone pavement of the alley. “Who found him?”

“The guy in black over there. Says he’ll only talk to you.”

The young police officer nodded in Zach Edgars’ direction, two buildings down and next to one of the two police cruisers, where he watched both the murder scene and the crowd gathering in the misty night—close enough to hear their conversation, far enough away not to attract too much attention. The brim of his fisherman’s hat pulled low over his eyes to keep his face hidden from any onlookers, he stepped further back to blend into the surrounding shadows as best he could.

The detective stood, cracked his neck from one side to the other, then shoved his hands into his pants pocket. With a nod to the medical examiner’s group to begin their processing of the body, he headed toward the cruisers, his open trench coat flapping in the wind as he walked. He came to a stop in front of Zach.

“Detective Ford. What’s your name?” the policeman asked, slipping a toothpick into the corner of his mouth.

“Zach Edgars,” he said, opening his hand so the other man could see his official credentials without announcing to everyone who he really worked for.

Ford arched a brow, but only nodded. *Good*. The guy got the picture that this was neither the place nor time for him to discuss the Office of Naval Intelligence’s interest in the man currently face down in the alley.

“You have anything to do with our vic getting dead?” Ford asked.

Zach shook his head. “Was on my way to meet with him and found him just like you see him.”

“Any chance you want to tell me what you two were going to discuss in a dark alley, late at night?” The detective eyed Zach up and down. “And why a Navy Captain is dressed like a dock worker?”

Again, Zach shook his head. “Best I can tell you at the moment is it’s classified.”

“Claaasssifiied...” Ford repeated, drawing out the word, frustration apparent in his voice. He moved to the side, so he could keep an eye on both Zach and the group gathered where the body lay. One man had a camera, taking pictures of the crime scene with big flashes of light from the bulb in the dark night. “This guy got a name? We didn’t find a wallet on him.”

“Goes by the name Mackerel Mike.”

“Mackerel Mike? Because he’s so short?”

“Be my guess,” Zach said, acknowledging the reason for the dead man’s nickname. “Worked on a fishing boat when the weather’s good. Hung out on the pier when it wasn’t.” He didn’t mention that most nights Mackerel Mike could be found hanging out in the bars on that pier. The last thing he needed was Ford’s investigation crashing into his.

Ford gnawed on the toothpick a little before speaking. “So, you think him ending up dead in this alley has something to do with your *classified* meeting?”

“Looks more like he got jumped and robbed. You said there was no wallet on him.” Zach’s stomach did a little flip, the weight of the dead man’s wallet suddenly feeling like a brick in his hip pocket. It went against everything he’d learned growing up to lie and steer this cop in the wrong direction, but it was imperative no one come down to the pier asking questions about Mackerel Mike—at least not until he knew more about the spies’ nest.

“Guess we’ll just chalk it up as a drunk getting mugged. Wrong place, wrong time, huh?”

“Guess so,” Zach agreed, happy to have the case closed as fast as the detective.

“Am I gonna find more of these mugged drunks lying around in dark alleys?” Ford asked, piercing Zach with a narrow-eyed look.

*The man wasn’t a fool.*

“Not if I can help it.”

“Then I guess we’re done here.” Ford gave him a nod of the head and sauntered back to his crime scene.

Zach slipped further into the shadows, watching the small crowd for anyone looking out of place, even though he suspected that whoever executed Mike was long gone. In his line of work, he’d learned two things—the smallest detail could be the lynch pin to solving a case and trust no one.

And yet, he’d trusted Mike, a man he’d met working on the docks near the Naval Academy in Annapolis. One of the poorer students, Zach had to help pay his way. His experience as a stevedore gave him a unique perspective about ships and how they were run, both commercially and militarily. Mackerel Mike had been one of the many different characters he’d met back then. So, when he’d gotten a note a month ago that he wanted to meet to talk, Zach hadn’t been sure what the old man wanted, but agreed to meet him anyways.

*“Good to see ya, boy. Been a while,” Mike said, slipping into the seat across from Zach. He looked around him in that way that always reminded Zach of a rat making sure no cats were around to chase him off a piece of scrap he’d found.*

*Zach motioned for the barkeep to send a couple of beers their way. Once the waitress dropped their glasses off at the table, he watched Mike down almost half of his drink in one gulp. “What is it you wanted to talk to me about?”*

*“You remember my friend, Gus?”*

*“Big guy? Walked with a limp?” The two had been pretty inseparable on the docks.*

*“Yeah, got that injury from a shark bite down in Florida when he was first working a fishing boat. Decided working the docks and merchant ships further north was safer.”*

*“Gus got something to do with why you wanted this meet?” He was trying to keep his patience, but he knew Mackerel Mike would take fifty words to tell a ten-word story.*

*Mike nodded and downed a third of the remainder of beer in his glass, wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his jacket. “When the Brits decided to go to war with them Naa-zis, old Gus signed up to work on a merchant marine ship taking supplies across the pond. Didn’t know why he thought he had to do that. Told him so. He says to me, he says, ‘Mike, there’s good people in the world and there’s bad. Them Naa-zis is some of the baddest ones ever. Besides, I don’t like bullies.’ He never did. That’s how we met, you know. He jumped into a fight between me and four other guys outside a bar. Saved my hide.” Mike*

*paused to take a breath, his eyes growing a little watery. He swallowed a few times, then shook his head. "Wish I could've returned the favor."*

*"Something happen to Gus?" Zach prodded.*

*"Them U-boats attacked the convoy his ship was in carrying food to the Brits." He paused again, the muscles around his mouth growing tense. "Not a soul from his ship survived."*

*Zach understood his anger. With every American merchant ship that went down trying to send relief cargo to the British, the need for military escort became apparent to him. Problem was, too many Americans and Congressmen still believed they could remain on the sidelines while England took the next wave of attacks from the Germans. This tied the President and all of America's military leaders' hands.*

*"Sorry to hear about Gus, Mike, but not sure what I can do to help you."*

*"Ain't wantin' you to help me, Lieutenant. I want to help you," Mike said.*

*Zach couldn't hide his surprise. "What are you thinking?"*

*"Seems to me, them Naa-zis might be getting information about the convoys from somewhere. Maybe along the docks somewhere," Mike said, toying with the glass in front of him. "I know an awful lot of people workin' those docks. Could keep my ears opened, work my way up and down the coast. See if I hear anything useful."*

*Zach considered his offer a moment before replying. "Mike, I know you want to help, but I'm not in a position to make you an official informant. I've barely started working at ONI."*

*"I know and I was real glad to hear you'd gotten that job. You always was good at listening and observing people, even down on the docks. Nothin' much slipped by you. I ain't askin' to be official. Not askin' to get paid. I'll just keep my eyes and ears open, maybe join one of those German-American Bund groups...lots of guys on the docks are talkin' about them. If I see or hear something useful, I'll let you know."*

*Zach gave him a nod. "Okay. You just don't do anything dangerous. Gus wouldn't want you doing anything dangerous."*

*Mike finished off his beer and gave that sly grin that once more reminded Zach of a rat on the wharf just after eating its fill. "I promise to stay out of harm's way."*

Only he hadn't. Two days ago, he'd sent a message to meet Zach here, said he had something important to tell him. Whatever it was, it had gotten him killed and Zach couldn't shake the thought it was his fault.

He crumpled his hand around the slip of paper he'd found in Mackerel Mike's pocket along with his wallet. It had one sentence: *Shanghaied in Wilmington.*